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Another Bureaucratic Compromise

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Editorial

Another Bureaucratic Compromise

Kenneth Hoyt observes in this issue that any lasting educational reform is largely dependent on a consensus among those groups that would be significantly affected by a particular reform. Such is true, and the same is sad. Since our educational system has been made, by acclamation, universal, all of the witty but nasty little truisms drawn up in the 1950s by C. Northcote Parkinson on the foibles of bureaucracy have come uncomfortably close to the mark.

Bureaucratic and special-interest positioning and subsequent compromise, oft in the form of some kind of beneficent “conflict resolution” consensus, is directly responsible for the curricular cafeteria that we are now trying to sort out. Because of the immense size of the educational enterprise and the economic implications of reform/change all the involved groups are acutely aware of the effect of any shift in emphasis.

Consider the plight of most institutions of higher learning and it is not difficult to understand why there is, at least on the informal (and therefore probably the more important) level, less than honest enthusiasm for doing away with the undergraduate education programs that have generated so many credit hours. To make this observation says nothing about the merit of the argument, but points out that bureaucratic and institutional leadership is distinct from visionary leadership.

Bureaucratic and institutional leadership is guided by the lodestars of “turf,” conflict resolution, and compromise. The key to understanding the dynamics of this leadership mode is to properly identify constituencies and interests. Visionary leadership is not usually generated, at least initially, in board offices, hotel meeting rooms, or nationally called conferences. As Tom Schall wrote in 1914 from a cabin in rural Minnesota, “Not in reveling palaces nor pillared halls are the deepest emotions felt, grandest conceptions born, or most vital truths discovered. But from Sinai’s slopes, from the felon cell at Bedford, from the chamber of blindness in London have come the inspirations that have blessed mankind.” Of such conceptions American education is now in need.

GDH